

The purpose of this policy is to provide information and guidance to schools about the safest way to handle animals in a school setting. The goal is to reduce human exposures to rabies and other zoonotic diseases (those transmitted from animals to people).

Animals Prohibited from Schools

The Vermont Department of Health recommends that the following animals be prohibited from schools:

Wild Animals and Stray Domestic Animals – Rabies is found regularly in Vermont’s wildlife populations. Any fur-bearing animal is susceptible to this very serious fatal disease and, if infected, can transmit it to students and staff. **A single wild animal or unvaccinated pet carrying rabies has the potential to expose a large number of children.**

Wild animals and stray domestic animals pose a risk for transmitting rabies and other zoonotic diseases. They should not be allowed in schools or handled. These include bats, raccoons, skunks, foxes, coyotes and other wild animals (either live or dead) as well as any stray domestic animal, such as a stray cat or dog, including kittens and puppies. Wolf-dog hybrids are also prohibited from schools.

Exceptions can be made when a wild animal is part of demonstration and is handled by someone experienced in wildlife handling. However, there should be no contact between the students and the animals, and the animals should be safely enclosed in a cage or other appropriate container. However, because of the high incidence of rabies in bats, raccoons, skunks, fox, and other carnivores, such animals should never be allowed on school grounds.

Poisonous Animals – Venomous or toxin-producing spiders, insects, reptiles and amphibians should be prohibited for safety reasons.

Bats– Bats pose a high risk for transmitting rabies. Bat houses should not be installed at schools.



Guidelines for Other Animals

Each school will determine whether the following animals are allowed or prohibited.

Chicks and Ducklings – Chicks and ducklings, even if they appear healthy, can spread *Salmonella* bacteria to people. *Salmonella* infections can be life-threatening in young children, the elderly and people with weakened immune systems, but anyone can become seriously ill. These animals should not be handled by children, pregnant women or individuals with infants at home. Anyone handling chicks or ducklings should wash their hands thoroughly, immediately following contact. There have been many documented outbreaks of illness after contact with chicks and ducklings, and they may not be appropriate in schools, especially if young children are in attendance.

Birds – Birds in the classroom should be housed in appropriate cages and not allowed to fly free. Psittacine birds, such as parakeets, parrots, cockatiels, and cockatoos, can be carriers of psittacosis, a potentially serious disease can be transmitted to people. People usually become infected by breathing in dust from dried bird feces. Sick birds should never be brought into school, but birds that appear healthy can also be carriers of this disease. Any birds brought into a classroom should be healthy, kept in a cage, and bird waste should be frequently cleaned out and safely discarded. Species

that are less likely to carry psittacosis may be more appropriate for the classroom.

Dogs, Cats, Puppies and Kittens – Puppies and kittens too young to be vaccinated for rabies should not be brought into a school unless they were born to a vaccinated mother, and they have been housed in a way that makes rabies exposure highly unlikely. Young animals are more likely to shed harmful bacteria and parasites in their stools, and may pose an unacceptably high risk for young children.

Adult dogs and cats could be occasional visitors to a school but must be under the control of their owner or handler. Before allowing a dog or cat on the school premises, it is important to make sure the animal has the proper temperament for the setting. They should be under care of a veterinarian, with proof of current rabies vaccination made available to the school staff. Cats and dogs should also be on a program of proper flea, tick, and intestinal parasite control.

Ferrets – Ferrets can be allowed to visit a classroom, but should be handled by the person responsible for them. Ferrets should be under the care of a veterinarian, with proof of current rabies vaccination made available to the school staff. Because they startle easily and may bite, school children should not be allowed to hold ferrets.

Reptiles and Amphibians – Reptiles (iguanas, snakes, lizards and turtles) and amphibians (frogs, salamanders and toads) are common carriers of *Salmonella* bacteria. Even healthy animals may carry these bacteria. There are many confirmed reports of transmission of *Salmonella* from these animals to people. Reptiles and amphibians may not be appropriate in schools, especially if young children are in attendance.

In people, infection with *Salmonella* usually causes diarrhea and fever. The illness can be life-threatening in very young children, the elderly and people with weakened immune systems, but anybody can become seriously ill. These animals should not be handled by children, pregnant women or individuals with infants at home. They should be housed in cages which provide a physical

barrier between the animal and the children (such as glass or plastic). Anyone handling a reptile or amphibian should wash their hands thoroughly, immediately following contact.

Guinea pigs, hamsters, gerbils, rabbits – Healthy guinea pigs, hamsters, gerbils and rabbits pose a limited health risk. Such animals may be allowed as classroom pets or as occasional visitors. However, even tame animals may react aggressively in strange situations, so student contact with animals should always be closely supervised, and animals should not be allowed to run loose in the classroom. Students should not be allowed to “kiss” these animals. Students and staff must wash their hands after handling these animals.

Fish – Fish pose a very limited health risk and may be allowed in the classroom. Tank water should not be disposed of in sinks that are used for food preparation or for obtaining drinking water. Gloves should be worn when cleaning the tank, and hands should be washed thoroughly afterwards.

Animal Care Recommendations

- Any animal present in the school or on school grounds must be clean and healthy so that the risk of transmission of disease to students and teachers is minimal. Animals that become ill should be removed from the school.
- Animals must be under veterinary care. Preventive care, including vaccination and parasite control, appropriate for the species, should be provided. Consider requiring a health certificate from a veterinarian before allowing the animal in the classroom.
- The school must be able to provide proper housing and nutrition for the animals. There must be a plan to care for the animals when school is not in session, such as weekends and holidays.
- Animal cages or tanks should be cleaned thoroughly on a regular basis. Young children should not be allowed to handle or clean up any form of animal waste (feces, urine, blood, etc.). Older children should be closely supervised. Wastes should be disposed of in a plastic bag or container with a lid. Anyone who cleans a cage or tank should wash their hands immediately afterwards.

General Recommendations

- Hand washing facilities must be conveniently located so that staff and students can wash their hands after each animal contact.
- In the event of an animal bite or scratch, procedures for first aid and notification of parents or legal guardians should be followed. In addition, animal bites should be reported to the local health officer in the town where the bite occurred **within 24 hours**, so the biting animal can be observed for any signs of illness.
- No animals should be allowed in food preparation areas at any time. Food handlers should not be responsible for clean-up of animal wastes. Cages and tanks should not be cleaned in areas where food is prepared.
- Children with immune deficiencies or those with allergies may be especially susceptible to diseases transmitted by animals or allergic reactions. Therefore, special precautions may be needed to minimize risks. Consultation with the school nurse and the child's parents about precautionary measures is strongly advised.
- Staff responsible for the animals should be very familiar with the behavior of the animals and proper husbandry practices.
- Consider notifying parents and/or obtaining their written consent prior to allowing animals in a classroom.

Implementing and Communicating the Animal Policy

To effectively protect students and staff, it is recommended that this Animal Policy must be followed by the entire school community. Parents, teachers, school nurses and other staff must be reminded of the policy on a regular basis and know of its provisions.

This document is intended to be a guideline and does not address all potential situations. Please contact one of the public health veterinarians, Dr. Bob Johnson or Dr. Erica Berl if you have any questions or would like help developing or implementing a more specific policy. Drs. Johnson and Berl can be reached at 1800-640-4374 or 802-863-7240.

For information about school field trips to visit animals, please see
http://healthvermont.gov/family/animals/field_trip.aspx

For additional information, please see the "Compendium of Measures to Prevent Disease Associated with Animals in Public Settings, 2009", MMWR Vol. 58/No. RR-5/May 1, 2009
<http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5805a1.htm>

Acknowledgement: This document is based, in part, on guidelines from the Kansas Department of Health and Environment.